

VZCZCXRO7905
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHFN #0314/01 1840840
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 020840Z JUL 08
FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2012
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000314

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, INR/AA (BGRAVES)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONE LOCAL ELECTIONS: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

REF: A. (A) FREETOWN 244

[1](#)B. (B) FREETOWN 300

[1](#)C. (C) FREETOWN 305

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The 2008 local government elections in Sierra Leone, scheduled for July 5, represent the next step forward in consolidating the peace process that began with the Lome Peace Accord. Fair and balanced elections at the local level will build on the process of devolution of power from the central government. Local councils play an integral role in providing social services and creating development schemes that impact the daily lives of Sierra Leoneans. The means and empowerment to fulfill this role, however, is beset by challenges, particularly due to sometimes strained relationships between traditional leaders and local representatives of the federal government. Loosely defined objectives for each party has resulted in struggles for influence and resources, and the resultant tension is on display in the final days of the campaigning period. Though seen by many as less politically significant than the 2007 national elections, the results of the local elections will nonetheless have huge impact on the citizens and overall political landscape over the next four years. END SUMMARY.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

[1](#)2. (U) In the early seventies, the Siaka Stevens' APC government banned local government in Sierra Leone, effectively centralizing power with the federal government in Freetown. The reason cited was endemic corruption in the councils. This centralization decision proved very costly. The Lome Peace Accord credits the resulting ineffectiveness, lack of social services and corruption among the underlying causes of the 1991-2002 civil war. The Local Government Act of 2004, an outcome of the Lome Peace Accord, restored the local councils and began the devolution process in Sierra Leone. The Act demarcates the boundary between the federal government, chiefdom councils and local councils in terms of tax revenue sharing and other core functions.

LOCAL COUNCILS: RESPONSIBILITIES AND ELECTIONS

[1](#)3. (U) According to the Local Government Act, the local council is the "highest political authority in the locality and shall have legislative and executive powers..." Nationwide, there are nineteen local councils, and each consists of a mayor or chairperson who presides over at least twelve councilors. Besides the elected officials, Paramount Chiefs are also represented. The councils have the responsibility of disbursing tied and untied grants from the central government, as well as local revenue generation. Moreover, the councils are the main body of government concerned with the political, social, and economic development and welfare in each respective locality.

14. (U) In accordance with the Act, two elections occur simultaneously: one to elect the mayor or council chairperson and the other to elect councilors. Representatives selected by the registered parties can compete for votes and independent candidates can register for participation. Candidates for the Office of Councilor and Office of Chairperson/Mayor of Council must achieve a simple majority and adult citizens vote directly during each cycle. For the mayor and chairperson election, officials tally votes across all wards in the locality. For the council election, officials tally the votes within each ward. The term of office for all seats on the local council is four years.

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION WITH TRADITIONAL LEADERS

15. (U) In addition to the councils, traditional leaders have considerable power at the local level. Paramount Chiefs, who are elected by representatives in the chieftdom and hold the seat of power for life, carry a great deal of credibility with the people. The primary source of power for the Paramount Chief is his or her control over the land in the area, which they hold in trust for the people. However, Paramount Chiefs generally have influence in all areas of community life, and can have great sway over individuals, decisions, be they personal or political.

16. (U) Paramount Chiefs oversee chieftdom councils, which include Section Chiefs and the Chieftdom Speaker. The role of the chieftdom councils is to prevent the commission of

FREETOWN 00000314 002 OF 002

offenses in the chieftdom, prohibit or restrict illegal gambling, and making and enforcing bye-laws. One primary point of contention between the local and chieftdom councils is the revenue-sharing scheme, with both parties seeking greater control over the collection and distribution of funds. Another point of contention is that the Local Government Act empowers local councils to create bye-laws. This can create an environment in which contradictory bye-laws are established by the different councils. Paramount Chiefs also report that local councils are not always inclusive, and make decisions without their input.

17. (SBU) The Paramount Chiefs do not have an official role in the democratic process of electing local council officials, are not eligible for candidacy themselves, and are meant to be party-neutral in the proceedings. A source at the Decentralization Secretariat, however, indicates that it is common practice for Paramount Chiefs and chieftdom councils to collaborate with politicians in favor of their interests in the local election process. Reports from the field also indicate that Paramount Chiefs are sometimes pressured by political parties to ensure votes for particular candidates, or that chiefs seek to collude with parties of their own accord. Rumors related to both pressure and collusion have circulated heavily in the run-up to these local elections, resulting in concerns about their democratic integrity (see ref C).

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

18. (SBU) The federal government is represented at the local level by an appointed Resident Minister. The Resident Minister is responsible for policy matters, technical guidance, and performance monitoring of the local councils. Given this role, regular interaction with local and chieftdom councils is necessary, though not always welcome. Discussions with Resident Ministers in various regions indicate frustration that they have no means with which to force local government to regularly and meaningfully communicate with them, or provide information on how federal funds are being

dispersed. Enforcement is challenging because Resident Ministers consider themselves without sufficient staff, infrastructure, or resources to meaningfully oversee the areas in their purview.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Though the local elections have received relatively limited attention outside of Sierra Leone, their results will have a significant impact on the daily life of citizens. The intricate tapestry of local, traditional, and federal powers woven by the decentralization process, while considered necessary to maintain peace, is not without flaws. The overlapping of roles and responsibilities creates unavoidable tension, the magnitude of which is determined locally by personalities and politicking. With power, money, and local influence up for grabs, it is not surprising that these elections have captured the nation's attention, and will continue to do so. END COMMENT.
PERRY